

06 August 2010

Kingsmead House Project Team
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Dear Sir/Madam

Public Consultation on the re-development of Kingsmead House. A response from Bath Heritage Watchdog.

Firstly as chairman I would like to thank all those present for the time and courtesy shown during my two visits to the consultation. As I stated at the time we would discuss the feedback received from others that had also visited in order to obtain a cross section of views and this has taken place. Rather than try to fill in one of your feedback forms I have done this in the form of a letter following the layout of your form as closely as possible. The comments are those put forward in response to the questions on your form.

Question 1) Should the existing building be retained or redeveloped?

It was agreed that there was no objection in principle to the demolition of the existing building, however there is a concern that what could replace it is equally inappropriate if not in terms of height but in mass, scale, bulk and style of design. It was unanimously agreed that any proposed replacement should sit seamlessly in the Conservation Area and World Heritage Site, respecting and reflecting in form and materials the setting of the listed buildings in the vicinity. There is no need to go all out to design a so called 'landmark' or 'gateway' building. Although the present structure is considered a landmark it is one the city is not proud of. The city has its landmark building, the Abbey. The location has its own local landmark Green Park Station and it should remain as such. There was concern that what is proposed is not re-development but over-development in terms of scale, bulk, mass and in particular density.

Question2) Do you think the building should be retained for office use? If so why?

The city councils own Spatial Strategy has this area earmarked as an office site and recent regeneration workshops also indicated this preference. There is no objection (in principle) to any specific use be it residential, mixed use or retail. We do appreciate that usage will have a considerable effect on the design proposed.

Question 3) Is a hotel an appropriate use for the redevelopment of the site?

While we prefer to make comments more on design grounds there were strong views among members to the use proposed and it was felt these should be relayed. The general consensus was that this was not an ideal location for an hotel and especially one with a 4star rating. Firstly there is no on-site parking, and public transport facilities from Park and Ride car parks are

not in close proximity. Both bus and rail stations are too far to use anything other than a taxi journey (because strangers will not know which buses serve Monmouth Street, the nearest stop) and the current road layout is not conducive to this. It was felt a better use of the site could be made in order to boost the local economy; there appearing to be no net gain.

Question 4) How important is the development to securing townscape improvements on this side of the city centre?

No one development should be used as a means to try to kick start others and while the current site is not worthy of Conservation Area and World Heritage status it does not stand in isolation. There is a fear any development of the scale and mass proposed here will be used as a carte blanche for the surrounding areas. The whole site has to come forward together based on an agreed master plan. It was felt the designs shown were not compatible with the local townscape. It should be remembered the local authority were the architects of the current blight in an attempt to regenerate some 50 years ago it became known as the 'Sack of Bath' Lightning cannot be allowed to strike twice.

Question 5) How important should sustainability be in the design of the proposals?

The answer to this largely depends on the definition of sustainability. At present this would appear to be defined as solar panels and green eco roofs etc all commendable aims but not the core issue. It is the building itself that should be sustainable. This is not the case here if you are proposing steel frames with pre-cast panels and large areas of glass all high embodied energy. Even the demolition of the existing building will form part of this. Such construction methods though the norm are not what we should be aspiring too in these eco-conscious times. We have to be looking at sustainability and longevity. You are proposing to demolish a structure some 50 years old to replace it with one that will in all probability be designed to last less than that.

We would direct you to the New Urbanists Congress in America to look at their research and designs in this field.

Question 6) What are the issues regarding the local character that need to be considered?

This should not be considered just on a local context but a city -wide understanding and appraisal. Scale, bulk and massing are the key indicators. Window spacings and roofscape are others. Local character would lead to a building of some 4-5 storeys plus mansard as the maximum height. Local character appraisals enforce this as well as legislation protecting the Conservation Area. These also define specific and appropriate materials. Attention to detail is important. Look across the road at Green Park Station one of Bath's best facades. Not Georgian but Victorian but with such quality and attention to detail that it is frequently taken as such. So worthy that they recreated it in Southgate though with less success. It is understanding of the best not the poor quality 60s packing cases or current trends that makes a successful Bath building. It above all has to have 'Bathness' If you were dropped in front of it blindfolded and the blindfold removed would you think you were in Bath?

It was felt that what was shown lacked this and that local character was not properly understood.

Question 7) What do you think of the proposals set out at the exhibition?

Here I would say the general opinion was not positive. It was thought by many that these proposals were not fully worked up and were more a sounding out of opinion. The only agreed position being that the idea of a curved frontage was not objectionable. It was felt by the majority (but not all) that the general design approach was uninspiring. A number of comments were reported to us by members and others of the similarity of the design to those proposed for the Western Riverside. It was felt that the designs presented fell far short of those required or expected in the heart of the World Heritage Site. The proposed mansard roof raised considerable concern from some over the style adopted and I could find no support for the window arrangement. In fact I have just compared these proposals to the recently shown for the Bath Press Site and again there are remarkable similarities in the design approach in terms of window spacing the treatment of the corner and general blandness. It was considered there was a lack of detail. There was no particular attention of emphasis given to the main entrance. The corner elevation was weak. It appears this a somewhat of a current trend for a one size fits all approach and not one specifically related to context and location. If any of the proposals were submitted as a planning application we could not support them.

Further Comments .

Below is a selection of comments which I have been asked to relay. Some are referred to above others are not. A piece of paper was handed around and members were invited to write down their thoughts.

- *“ Could not reconcile the lack of facilities proposed those expected of a 4Star hotel. I.e. no sauna, no fitness suite/gym. No mention of an interlinked set of rooms in a conference suite”*
- *“Design relates poorly to local context”*
- *“Ground-floor and colonnades relates poorly to local context, the use of arcade style shop fronts in this location are not appropriate and a number of adverse comments were received about the introduction of these in the Green Park House proposals”*
- *“ Lack of recognizable architectural treatment of the entrance”*
- *“ Cues must be taken from local vernacular and context such as Charles Street and Green Park Station”*
- *“ The openness of the site must be maintained, This looks like a barrier breaking the city down into defined zones”*
- *“ A reduction in height of at least 2 storeys”*
- *“ regular window spacing's are essential”*
- *“ A variety of height of roofscape should be considered”*
- *“Use of Bath Stone ashlar and slate”*
- *“No butterfly or gull wing roofs”*
- *“ Reservations regarding the use and maintenance of green roofs”*
- *“ Design if a contemporary option is being considered must draw on a thorough understanding of Bath, local context and materials”*
- *Design should not be based on or dictated by the preferences of the local authorities urban panel and urban design team. They have left us with the legacy of the ‘Busometer’ (The new Bus Station)*

Conclusion

We hope these comments are taken in the spirit of which they are intended and that further rounds of consultation are taken before any final submission is made to the planning office. We would be more than willing to participate. I also hope the old pictures I brought in of the area will enable a better understanding of context and give an indicator of the scale and mass appropriate for the site as well as influence design details.

We thank you again for your consultation and presentation.

Yours sincerely

Patrick Hutton
Chair
Bath Heritage Watchdog